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## Žižek's Ethics

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### **Abstract**

Despite Žižek's privileging of politics over ethics, it is possible to reconstruct from his work a very significant, thoroughgoing reconception of ethics and metaethics. He sets forth accounts of the nature of ethics, action, freedom, the supreme moral principle, the fact-value split, the relation of the self to others, and the values that should determine our actions. He expresses a Kantian/Lacanian notion of law and freedom, an Hegelian critique of the subject-object distinction, a Lacanian subversion of the fact-value split, and an Adornian quasi-formalist treatment of ethical imperatives. The most radical element within his ethics is arguably his notion of the *passage à l'acte*, according to which certain types of actions not only transgress extant norms, but challenge the very nature of the norms, transform the coordinates of the reality principle, and bring into being its conditions of value.

**Key Words:** Žižek, Ethics, Lacan, Kant, Normativity

Žižek privileges politics over ethics,<sup>1</sup> arguing to the priority of political economy over isolated, individualist, or voluntarist treatments of personal decision. He writes that ethics and jurisprudence, which he considers the poles of contemporary post-political thought, are deficient in that they delimit political thought to realizing or balancing ethical accounts of rights that pre-exist politics (ET118-119). In order to effect a radical transformation of society, politics must break free of this ethico-legal entanglement by means of “a *theologico-political* suspension of the ethico-legal” (ET119). Hence, Žižek clearly regards ethics as insufficiently radical in comparison to politics, which has no such limits as the determining abyssal space in which ethics first can take place (LN963). This explains the absolute priority he lends to politics over ethics. Yet, his work, nonetheless, provides the basis for a thoroughgoing reconception of ethics and metaethics. While he never offers a single systematic account of his ethics in one place, it is possible to piece together a detailed picture of his metaethics and a limited picture of his ethical injunctions from *Living in the End Times*, *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism?*, *The Year of Dreaming Dangerously*, *Less than Nothing*, and Appendix III of *The Plague of Fantasies*. In these texts, Žižek sets forth accounts of the nature of ethics, action, freedom, the supreme moral principle, the fact-value split, the relation of the self to others, and the values that should determine our actions. The overall picture falls within the genus of postmodern ethics, despite his explicit and oft-stated antipathy to postmodernism, for it is determined thematically and terminologically by appropriative, and thus, transformative readings of Kant, Hegel, Levinas, Adorno, Lacan, and Derrida, but his synthesis of these thinkers pushes back against postmodernist relativism in favor of universal communist values. To simplify, his account of law and freedom is Kantian and Lacanian; his critique of the subject-object distinction is Hegelian; his subversion of the fact-value distinction is Hegelian and Lacanian; his quasi-formalist, reflexive response to the fact-value split is Adornian; and his account of the self’s relation to others and the values that should govern that relation is a variation

on Levinasian and Derridean ethics, with one notable addition, a Hegelian reading of Paul that takes us straight into slave morality.

Žižek's ethics depends heavily on his problematization of the split between facts and values, and accordingly, between the philosophical disciplines of ethics, politics, ontology, and epistemology. It is not that he abandons all such divisions absolutely, for with Lacan and against Alain Badiou, he actually posits an ineradicable split between ethics and ontology. Yet, he also posits the essential relatedness of the two spheres, calling them mutually interpellated, in Louis Althusser's term; the normative sphere interrupts, frames, and brings into being the ontological-epistemic real and the ontological-epistemic sphere interrupts, frames, and brings into being the normative sphere. Thus, Žižek simultaneously posits the impossibility and the necessity of the fact-value split. Facts, conceived nominalistically, exist apart from the sphere of values, yet values and the Real are mutually co-constitutive. He can justify this apparent inconsistency by his Lacanian distinction between reality and the Real. Whereas commonsense 'reality' refers to individual sense representations or their objective correlate,<sup>2</sup> Žižek calls the Real "the brute and pre-symbolic reality" (SOI162), "a substantial hard kernel that precedes and resists symbolization and ... the left-over, which is posited or 'produced' by symbolization itself" (TN36). This latter formulation indicates the essential relatedness of Real and symbolic. Later, he argues that "the Lacanian Real at its most radical is not a pre-symbolic substance; it rather emerges through the redoubling of the symbolic" (LN480). The sense in which the Real is a redoubling of the symbolic is that it constitutes an impossible "curvature or distortion" immanent to the symbolic field, changing its meaning as its excess, a barrier to symbolization itself (LN960). In the example he gives, shaking a friend's hand repeatedly and rhythmically without letting go, the formal gesture of greeting is given "an obscene sexual undertone," altering entirely the normal perfunctory symbolism of a handshake (LN960). The slight variation on the usual gesture invokes the Real in so far as it exhibits, distorts, and undermines the gesture's conventional symbolism by calling forth an element of unspeakable desire from which the gesture is ordinarily free. Thus, it demonstrates how the symbolic field is a semblance that, nonetheless, exercises a certain reality precisely in its distance from nominal reality (LN971). On this account, the

Lacanian Real is simultaneously unknowable, because it cannot be symbolized, and an immanent product of symbolization that alters the symbolic field constitutive of values and meanings. This curved space means that “every ethical and/or moral edifice has to be grounded in an abyssal act which is, in the most radical sense imaginable, *political*, ... [as] the very space in which, without any external guarantee, ethical decisions are made and negotiated” (LN963). Hence, the distinction between reality and the Real allows Žižek to argue both that ethics is not determined by reality, conceived nominalistically as individual entities, and that ethics is determined in relation to the Lacanian Real and the Big Other of the symbolic order,<sup>3</sup> which differs from individual reality as a subjective presupposition with a purely virtual existence sustained by our activity, and which enables our action as its frame of reference and ultimate horizon of meaning (HRL10-11). Hence, a proper understanding of ethics is both divorced from objective facts and nominalist ontology and constituted by the combination of the unsymbolizable Real and the ubiquitous symbolic order.<sup>4</sup> For this reason, the Lacanian distinction between reality and the Real provides for a substantial improvement over the orthodox continental problematization of the fact-value distinction by directly confronting the question of how what is the case (ideationally-conventionally-practically) can affect what ought to be the case (evaluatively). In Žižek’s example, the race for domination of the Arctic exhibits how “[a]n event first experienced as real but impossible [the melting of the Arctic] ... becomes real and no longer impossible (once the catastrophe occurs, it is ‘renormalized’, perceived as part of the normal run of things, as always already having been possible). The gap which makes these paradoxes possible is that between knowledge and belief” (ET328). There is a sense, then, in which factual and ideological (symbolic) changes alter the scope and possibilities of values in ways heretofore unimaginable, and hence, the fact-value split is an overly simplistic, static rendering of a dynamic, reciprocal relationship between mutually transformative fields. This solution still leaves us with an unsatisfying nominalistic account of reality as individual subjects and objects, displacing to the symbolic order the Nietzschean and Heideggerian criticisms that the discourse of subjects and objects involves the metaphysics of grammar, of the derivative level of the *logos apophantikos*, or of simple Cartesian presence-at-hand, neglecting being-in-the-world. However, Žižek’s approach,

nonetheless, sets up an important alternative to a nominalist ontology in a distinct social-symbolic order and an uncrackable kernel of the Real, both of which are largely independent of individual consciousness.

Concretely, Žižek's criticism of the fact-value split, then, goes far beyond merely unseating simple oppositions, the task of "an old-fashioned dialectical materialist" (DSST216). Indeed, Žižek writes philosophy as if there are no disciplinary separations, shifting constantly between aesthetics, ethics, politics, theology, epistemology, and ontology,<sup>5</sup> a procedure that demonstrates this, as it were, promiscuous mixing of factual and evaluative dimensions. Žižek treats all these subjects as part of the single greater critical project of political economy, of the politicization of the economy (ET185). Political economy examines the historical question of how to think about a movement with "radical emancipatory" potential (ET183) without falling into the traps of liberalism, totalitarianism, or postmodernism. The basic problem, how "the public political space [can] function in such a de-substantialized universe" (ET326), necessarily involves a political ontology, because it involves situating facts and values within a common space without positing an inherent substance unifying fact and value absolutely.

We see all of these different topics in the first chapter of *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism?* Žižek locates Lacan's followers within their historical-political context; discusses various Lacanian and Freudian psychological interpretations of tragic, comic, mock-tragic, mock-comic, and post-tragic mythology, literature (Hamlet, Oedipus), and film (*Terms of Endearment*, *Jean de Florette*, *Manon of the Spring*); compares these views to particular interpretations of the Stalinist show trials and the Holocaust; situates them in terms of particular epistemologies and Hegelian dialectics; sets them against postmodernist interpretations of similar phenomena; posits proper Marxist resolutions; and uses a certain notion of Christianity as a model for dealing with paradox and difference through the vanishing mediator. Žižek's inquiry thus involves the interplay of aesthetics, ethics, politics, theology, economics, history, ontology, epistemology, and language.

This project is simultaneously ontological and normative, for it sets forth histories of the subject and examines how these histories transform evaluative

perspectives for judging them. We recognize the significance and historicity of facts and values, that history changes values and subjective possibilities. For Žižek, the sphere of aesthetics is crucial to this transformation of the fact-value split, because aesthetics most obviously concerns the symbolic order in its virtual, subjective constitution of social reality. Tragedy, comedy, and the mock-tragic, mock-comic or post-tragic provide models by which we can describe this history and judge the adequacy of any particular account of it. These distinct frameworks for the construction of social reality also enable us to think about possibilities for its resistance in its constituent individuals, whether imagined as subjects, victims, or moral persons worthy of respect and dignity. The paramount figure for this resistance in Žižek is the Christian vanishing mediator. He argues that the subject can rise above history and thus relate to it solely in this theological device of the vanishing mediator, the Christ figure, a “*moque-comique*” figure (DSST179). Theology also provides a source for the resultant values of love, solidarity, and self-destruction or slave morality.<sup>6</sup>

In this experience of a real impossible event (the Christ story) and the subsequent redrawing of the nature of possibility and reality, Žižek enables his incorporation of value in the very nature of the person. We can speak of “the very ethical substance of my being” (DSST14) and this ethical substance can change, collapse, and thus require that we “improvise and invent new rules ad hoc” (ET324). Hence, ethical value is itself subject to transformation by reality, and if reality is in flux, so are values. Moreover, just as we cannot posit an absolute separation between the evaluative or normative and the factual or descriptive domains, we cannot situate the determination of these domains within an isolated atomic subject. The revision and transformation of our situatedness, our *Sittlichkeit*, “the substantial ethical base of our social activity,” requires “the intersubjective space in which, through complex interaction, a solution can be agreed upon” (ET324). Ethical problems must be re-situated within the political sphere of intersubjectivity, rather than being dealt with in an a priori isolated, atomistic fashion, because political economy views subjects as social beings formed in relation to the symbolic order, the imaginary, the Real, history, language, society, and other subjects.

Žižek uses the category of action as a means not merely of mediating between facts and values and thus problematizing the fact-value split, as in the Marxist concept of praxis, but also of transforming the nature and relations of the terms involved. This radical shift enables a reconception of the entire problematic. Against linear-historicist accounts (DSST11), such as Marx's evolutionary historicism, that reduce all historical events to external governing necessities or telic ends (YDD7-8), Žižek resuscitates a strong sense of agency<sup>7</sup> in his definition of action as an intervention between facts and values, subjectivity and objectivity. Action transforms both poles of the opposition, and thereby enables alternate conceptions of free agency and morality to idealist and materialist, modern and postmodern accounts.<sup>8</sup> Progress for Žižek occurs through structural formations but also interventions in civil structure. The Leninist intervention, in advance of some necessary historical moment, "*would radically change the 'objective' relationship of forces itself, within which the initial situation appeared 'premature' ... it would undermine the very standard to which reference told us that the situation was 'premature'*" (DSST114). Indeed, the act undermines the very notion that objective forces determine history by showing that "*there is no objective logic of the 'necessary stages of development', since 'complications' arising from the intricate texture of concrete situations and/or from the unanticipated results of 'subjective' interventions always disrupt the smooth course of things*" (DSST115). Yet, this is not mere subjectivism. In Leninist fashion, we need to make our history, to intervene "in social reality [in a way that] changes the very coordinates of what is perceived as 'possible'" and desirable; "it is not simply 'beyond the Good', it redefines what counts as 'Good'" (DSST167). Action, at least of the radical sort known as the *passage à l'acte*, "the violent explosion which destroys the symbolic link itself" (ET326), transforms the conditions determinative of social possibility and value. "[T]he ethical act – or, rather, the act *as such*" constitutes "an intervention that *changes the very co-ordinates of the 'reality principle'*". The Freudian 'reality principle' does not designate the Real, but the constraints of what is experienced as 'possible' within the symbolically constructed social space – that is, the demands of social reality" (DSST167). Action alters the co-ordinates of what is significant, desirable, valuable, possible, and real. Instead of holding out ethics as a pure realm destroyed by any attempt to associate it with

particular pragmatic, political action, as in Derrida and Habermas, Žižek argues that “the ethical act proper is a *transgression* of the legal norm – a transgression which, in contrast to a simple criminal violation, does not simply violate the legal norm, but redefines what *is* a legal norm ... The act is therefore not ‘abyssal’ in the sense of an irrational gesture that eludes all rational criteria; it can and should be judged by universal rational criteria ... it changes (re-creates) the very criteria by which it should be judged – there are no *antecedent* universal rational criteria that one ‘applies’ when one accomplishes an act” (DSST170). The point is that there is a difference between the ethical and the legal, such that the ethical is transcendent and therefore differs from the legal both in substance and in its violation of the proceduralism constitutive of the nature of the law. However, in reconstituting the norm and thus setting forth new criteria for rational judgment, the ethical differs from the irrationalist destruction of norms as such.<sup>9</sup> By thus reconceiving the very terms and relations of the debate, the category of action in Žižek shows the way beyond the traditional debates over the fact-value split. As a vanishing mediator between facts and values, action exhibits the co-constitution and mutual transformation of ethics and reality.

Hence, it is by reconceiving reality in terms of the Lacanian categories of the imaginary, the symbolic, and the real that Žižek can break the deadlock between substantive, formal, and postmodernist tolerant, relativist, fictionalist ethics. He divides contemporary philosophical ethics into:

[A]ttempts to provide a direct ontological foundation for ethics via some substantial (communitarian, for example) notion of supreme Good; attempts to save ethical universalism by sacrificing its substantial content and giving universalism a proceduralist twist (Habermas, Rawls); and the ‘postmodern’ attitude, where the quintessential and only all-encompassing rule is to be aware that what we perceive as ‘truth’, our own symbolic universe, is merely one in a multitude of fictions, and thus not to impose the rules of our game on the games of others – that is, to maintain the plurality of narrative games (PF273).



Read as an Hegelian triad, the three positions amount to the immediacy of a substantive good, its negation in the formalism of proceduralist ethics, and the negation of the negation in “the postmodernist renunciation of universality itself,” which sustains only the negative “universal ethical precepts” of acceptance of difference, otherness, and alternative language games (PF273-74). The first position collapses any distinction between the real and the good, or founds being on the good, as in Plato, while the second position annuls the reality of the good and the good of reality, by situating value in abstract forms, procedures, or regulative norms, constituting a quietistic affirmation of the status quo, and the third position ultimately collapses into the formalistic acceptance of being in proclaiming the normative demand that we disengage ourselves from substantive claims (PF273-74).

The fourth position, Žižek’s Lacanian alternative, seems to reassert the absolute split between the real and the good. However, for Žižek, there can be such a separation only in a certain paradoxical sense where the split is itself constitutive of reality and the ethical sphere, so that it is not that reality is here and the normative there, but that each is permeated by the lack in its other. His Lacanian transformation of the categories of the real and the normative, the objective and the subjective, allows him to posit an inherent, intrinsic relation of ethics and ontology-epistemology, radically conceived as non-hermeneutic phenomenology (PF280). The Lacanian alternative is “an ethics grounded in reference to the traumatic Real which resists symbolization, the Real which is experienced in the encounter with the abyss of the Other’s desire .... There is ethics – that is to say, an injunction which cannot be grounded in ontology – in so far as there is a crack in the ontological edifice of the universe: at its most elementary, ethics designates fidelity to this crack” (PF274). Ethics consists, then, in injunctions deprived of ontological determination by the impossibility of raising the Real of the desire of the traumatic other to the level of the symbolic order. We cannot say or determine this abyssal real. Thus, Lacan does not mean by the Real anything like ordinary reality, conceived in nominalist terms as external individuals. “If the Lacanian Real is simply another version of ‘reality’ as the ultimate and unsurmountable point of reference of the symbolic process, then Lacan’s endeavor to formulate a new ‘ethics of the real’ effectively amounts to a return to pre-modern substantialist ethics” (PF274).

The traumatic real rather constitutes a crack in the nature of the real that expresses not the asymptotic limit of its conception as an absent, governing end, but rather an inherent gap within the very presencing of being. Being is itself defined by its withdrawal, as its inherent, intrinsic concealedness. The original is already constituted by the order of fantasy, such that no 'truth' or fidelity to being through identical reformation can dissolve the constitutive absence or lack in being. The Lacanian Real is not "the ultimate referent which fixes/limits the play of signifying displacements, ... [it asserts] the distinction between the Real and (objective) reality ... [for] the trauma *qua* real is not the ultimate external referent of the symbolic process, but precisely that X which forever hinders any neutral representation of external referential reality ... the very stain or spot which disturbs and blurs our 'direct' perception of reality – which 'bends' the direct straight line from our eyes to the perceived object" (PF275). The Real asserts the failure of the real, of truth as this gravitational pull, this refractory, prismatic medium, or parallax view that makes correspondence impossible; the parallax view "is inscribed into the 'real'" thing itself (ET244). The mutual displacement of subject and object intrinsic to the 'real' establishes the link between the ontological-epistemological and the ethical without devolving into any quietistic affirmation of being. Žižek's own view avoids binding being and values by incorporating freedom in the nature of the real. "Not only is this Real not opposed to freedom – it is its very condition" (DSST58). Freedom is thus enabled by the "traumatic encounter with the Other" (DSST58), in so far as it exhibits the impossibility of translating or symbolizing the enigma of the other's desire, and thus, exposing the enigma as a fixed nature determined to a certain action.<sup>10</sup> There can be no absolute separation between the noumenal and the phenomenal, the transcendental and the natural, realms, because the idea of transcendental freedom involves "the unthinkable direct intervention of the noumenal into the phenomenal in the guise of a violent tearing up of the chains of the natural causality which is not yet kept in check by the moral Law" (PF306). This freedom is open to the determination of virtues, as a radical Kantian liberation that enables one to self-determine particular manifestations of the indeterminate universal moral law, yet which is self-limiting in recognizing the inherent gap between ourselves and noumena. So, the ethics that Žižek develops is a variation on Adorno's critical aesthetics, a work

that in its very form brings into question the nature of the subject-object distinction. It is a questioning of the distinction between form and matter that constitutes a meta-reflection on form, on the proper relation between the universal, the particular, and the singular. The content of freedom is self-referential, as the subject's assumption of its freedom. There appears to be a similarity here to Sartre and de Beauvoir in their formal insistence on the universalization of freedom such that, on their argument, I cannot without contradiction do anything but assume my own freedom, and the realization of my own freedom is intertwined with and depends upon the freedom of all. However, this similarity is only superficial, because the idea that the form of freedom is simultaneously the substance of ethics depends here upon recognizing the impossibility of conscious primacy. I cannot govern myself consciously and according to explicit rules, because the core of subjectivity is necessarily distanced from myself and the sphere of explicit rules. Žižek stresses the embeddedness of explicit rules within the Lacanian Real, conceived as the dimension of an obscene or socially unsayable supplement of inexplicit beliefs, desires, and rules. In some cases, this supplement can be said but to do so would be to violate an entire set of social strictures and to destroy the function of what is said; in other cases, it is the uncrackable kernel of subjectivity. The details of social expectations are complex and may elude any individual consciousness, though their practical violation will often be glaring or recognized upon post-mortem reflection. Thus, in the one case, one would violate expectations if one answered the question, "how are you?" with a detailed account of one's mental state, illnesses, affairs, and so forth; in the other case, the kernel of subjectivity would be at work in all experience without itself being possible to know or disclose.

### **Žižek's Values**

Finally, Žižek advocates a set of ethical values centered on his conception of the idea of communism. On his account, ethics must be emancipatory (DSST131), excessive in generosity and forgiveness (DSST132), severe in recognizing material determination by social circumstances (DSST132), and characterized by community, solidarity (DSST135), and collective rationality (DSST133). While he asserts that the key ethical standard for the accuracy of our historical descriptions (DSST60) consists in

our preservation of the otherness of the other, his discussion of the part of no part provides the clearest account of his highest moral value. The meaning of solidarity and equality for Žižek is not that we adhere to a formalistic equality of negative juridical rights or that we attend to the most oppressed classes by accepting the existence of inequality, if only in so far as it benefits the least advantaged, as in Rawls, but rather that we *identify* with the part of no part, the most oppressed class of society. Žižek's criticism of Rawls, following Jean-Pierre Dupuy, is that the use of inequality to benefit the least advantaged would create explosive conditions of *ressentiment* because it would thereby justify lower status and remove my excuse of social injustice (HRL, 36-37, V.87-88). We would prefer the neighbor's loss even to our own gain, if the latter were accompanied by the neighbor's even greater gain (HRL, 36-37, V.88-89). But it would also fail to engage directly with difference, for this program refuses to truly engage in relations with the difference of the radically excluded neighbor. What is needed is to identify absolutely with the other *in his or her traumatic otherness*, in the radical challenge they pose to the status quo of the symbolic order,<sup>11</sup> rather than to think about all individuals in terms of the abstract equality of negative rights, to justify through mild amelioration the injustice of unearned inequality, to include the other within our social norms on a program of social conformity, as in Habermas 1996, or to continue to hold the other at a distance by treating the other as other. Thus, in response to critics who assert his Eurocentrism, Žižek writes that he conceives of universality precisely as solidarity, as an identification with the struggles of the other as his own: "[w]henver there is a political struggle outside the west, my question is: can my and their struggle become moments of the same struggle? This is why, for example, I was able to identify fully and immediately with the Tahrir Square demonstrators in Cairo, with protests in Greece, with the antiracist struggle in Africa," and so forth (Žižek 2013, 776-77).

Of course, there is no indication in Žižek of precisely what this identification entails.<sup>12</sup> But his refusal to spell out in concrete detail the entailments of his idea of communism<sup>13</sup> depends on his view that the most radical act can at times be the withdrawal into thinking that refuses to engage in the extant, determinative framework of decision (V.214-17) in order to question the very nature of how we identify the problems that we face (ET411). And the very nature of our ethical substance, of the

thick set of largely implicit social norms and rules that govern our interrelations, is such as to resist its outright and direct expression, because these rules are innumerable, only partially linguistic, often unspeakable, gestural, physical, situational, mental, and liminal. Indeed, we often cannot even refer to their existence, as this fluctuating set of known and unknown knowns and unknowns is altered in the very act of its explicitation. Most significantly, the *passage à l'acte* defines radical ethical action precisely by transforming the very framework and nature of the symbolic order. In this traumatic encounter with the other, the possibilities of our social order are themselves questioned and reconstituted intersubjectively. The values of Žižek's ethics lie in this contested futural space and therefore they cannot be set forth now in their totality and particularity.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> For an account of his politics, see Dean 2006.

<sup>2</sup> Žižek's notion of commonsense realism is akin to Fredric Jameson's notion of understanding, "common-sense empirical thinking of externality, formed in the experience of solid objects and obedient to the law of non-contradiction" (in LN275).

<sup>3</sup> Žižek elsewhere describes the Lacanian big Other as "this agency of social rules and appearances which confers on everything we do a minimal aspect of theatricality ... our desire is always a desire of the Other, mediated by the Other (the symbolic texture which provides the scripts for possible desires); we are not directly ourselves, we play the role of ourselves, we imitation a fiction of what we are" (LN578).

<sup>4</sup> This too is where Miller locates in Lacan the basis for an ethics, although Miller's focus is not on the split between facts and values. He argues that "the good beyond all recognized goods" in Lacan is situated in the Real, which makes possible a questioning of extant goods because it is a "realm beyond the contingent forms of our socially constituted symbolic norms and Imaginary projections" (Miller 2009, 53). But Miller clearly differs from Žižek in asserting that the Real "is unassimilable to the ideological norms of a given cultural formation" (ibid.), in that for the latter these ideological norms are very much a part of that formation, although not identifiable absolutely with it; the unwritten rules and the obscene excess are other elements of the Real for Žižek that destabilize but also realize ideology.

<sup>5</sup> Harpham argues that Žižek treats so many different disciplines—often expertly—that he places into question the very notion of a disciplinary separation, of "an orderly inquiry producing falsifiable results in a limited field" (Harpham 2003, 460).

<sup>6</sup> For criticisms of Žižek's privileging of Christianity, see Rose 2016, which gives some credence to the claims that in choosing Christian love and universal solidarity over Jewish law (which Žižek himself characterizes as fulfilled precisely in Christian adherence to Jewish law), his views are anti-Semitic and anti-Islamic. However, Rose concludes that his understanding of antagonisms within every culture should enjoin that the radical re-imagining of Christian and

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European traditions that he seeks should be extended to all sorts of non-Western legacies as well, so that European Christianity is no longer privileged (Rose 2016, 278).

<sup>7</sup> Wang questions the strength of agency in society by arguing that “the revolutionary potential of the proletariat cannot be actualized without an external act that recognizes this potential and forces the proletariat to act as a revolutionary subject. One necessary component imposed externally onto the working class qua revolutionary potential is the Party, which would transform the working class into a revolutionary subject, from in-itself to for-itself” (Wang 2008, 484). In other words, structure (that of the party) is essential to agency (the proletariat’s ability to act as revolutionary subject). On Žižek’s account, structure is certainly crucial to agency, but at the same time the Leninist act transforms the possibilities and norms of action beyond any structural limits.

<sup>8</sup> Non-action or omission of action can also ground guilt without thereby being anything other than non-action combined with knowledge, as in Pagnol’s *Jean de Florette* and *Manon des Sources*, in which the guilt of the community lies “in the discrepancy between their knowledge and their action” (DSST22). Again, the void of causal explanation for the loss of the town’s water is filled by meaning through the priest’s claim that it “signal[s] some ethical failure of the community,” and so values are placed ideologically in the physical causal role where praying is to solve the problem, even as the priest recognizes that Manon will actually unblock the source (DSST24).

<sup>9</sup> Hence, if Goldfarb is correct that the radical act or event *appears* irrational in exploding any extant rational criteria for judging it (Goldfarb 2016, 63), it is not irrationalist, because it creates the rational criteria for its judgment.

<sup>10</sup> Kaufman argues in contrast that for Lacan, ethics, which is violated only by giving ground in relation to one’s desire (Kaufman 2002, 141), is constituted not by the relation to the other, but by the “*nonrelation* to the self” (citing Lacan, Seminar VII, “The Ethics of Psychoanalysis,” 319, in Kaufman 2002, 136). There is a split within the self that rules out any relation to it, but there is also a nonrelation to the other, because there is no total or unified self or other to which a relation might be established.

<sup>11</sup> And, as Goldfarb points out, the part of no part directly experiences the exploitative character of capitalism in its extreme, and therefore is particularly well placed to recognize its antagonisms and thus to lead to its destruction (Goldfarb 2016, 65).

<sup>12</sup> Chamberlain questions whether Žižek’s proposed policies on refugees (including military direction, “reception” centers, registration, transportation to European way stations, limited choices of destination) indicate anything close to such a direct identification with the other, on grounds that Žižek appears to question whether refugees can be admitted to Europe if they do not accept Western Christian values (Chamberlain 2016, 8). As Rex Butler discusses, Sean Homer in *Slavoj Žižek and Radical Politics* criticizes Žižek not only on similar grounds but also for failing to arrive at any specific political praxis, because he asserts the undecidability of politics (Butler 2016, 2). However, if there is anything to this critique, it would have to be unintentional, because Žižek rails so often against Derrida and postmodernism precisely for their understanding of politics as undecidable. As I discuss here and elsewhere, there are other reasons for Žižek’s avoidance of a detailed political program for revolution, including the transformation of ethical value effected by the *passage á l’acte*.

<sup>13</sup> In his speech to Occupy Wall Street, Žižek states instead that “[t]he only sense in which we are communists is that we care for the commons. The commons of nature” (Žižek 2012b, 120).